

## Women, Gender, and Disaster: A Case Study of Flood Victims in Kota Bharu, Kelantan

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### Abstract

This paper aims to identify the gender issues in flood situation by investigating the experiences of women and men during flood disaster. It is also focusing on factors that contributes to and affects women's vulnerability during flood. Literature on gender and disasters shows the importance of gender in disaster mitigation to increase women's resilience to disaster. Therefore, this paper also seeks to understand, whether gender has been adequately addressed in the local disaster management plan and its consequences. Drawing on narrative accounts from three focus group discussions involving 23 respondents, the study investigates the impacts of floods event on women's lives, livelihoods, and health. The research finding shows that there are still gender gap in flood disaster responses and in the existing disaster management plan. Aids were not equally distributed among victims, with too much emphasized for those who were staying at the flood-evacuation centre while marginalizing those who were staying at relative's house or other places. Women with small children whose husbands were away have to independently survive, and single mothers were not given enough attention during the emergency times. Therefore, current responses and procedures to flood disaster management model have to be reviewed and gender dimension have to be integrated in order to significantly improve the preparedness and relief program during flood disaster. This study highlights the need of detailed analysis on how disaster or flood affects women and how Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) planning could be more gender-sensitive.

Keywords: *Gender issues, flood disaster, women, Malaysia*

### 1. Introduction

In disaster-management cycle, women's vulnerability is emerged in every stage of it. In terms of survival skills, women are less likely than men to have lifesaving skills such as swimming, climbing, knowledge of technology because cultural restrictions define gender roles and responsibilities. This puts them in danger during and after a disaster and prevents them from saving other lives. As a result, casualties are higher among women and girls during and after earthquakes and floods (Shwoebel and Menon, 2004). In Malaysia, floods are the main disaster that has brought severe impacts on the people affecting livelihoods, damaging

properties and infrastructures and lives as well. According to Chan (2010), flood disaster management in Malaysia is more focused on a top-down government-centric approach and suggested that victims or member of public need to be actively engaged and involved to enhance their ability to respond to flood. In this case women victims, often tend to be regarded as vulnerable victims who need to be protected and told what to do rather than be seen as potential resources.

If the Malaysian government is concern over the effectiveness of the existing disaster management plan, a better evidence of the gender analysis of disaster management plan and its impact on the social welfare of the people is very critical. Using gender analysis, this study aims to identify the gender gaps in the existing disaster management plan and structures and to ensure that gender perspective is incorporated in disaster management structures, institution and policies. Gender analysis is an effective tool for understanding how communities work and the changing differential effects of disasters on men and women in different socioeconomic groups. Gender analysis provides a useful guide for improving accountability regarding effects and impacts of interventions for results-based management. This, undoubtedly, will significantly improve the preparedness and relief program. The development of a model that integrates gender perspectives in disaster management plan will highlight the critical areas or problems and the challenges faced by the women and vulnerable groups that affected by disaster. The development of more gender sensitized disaster management policy is important as it will ensure that gender issues and women needs are adequately recognized.

## 2. Literature Review

In general term, vulnerability can be defined as the inability to withstand the effects of a hostile environment. In relations to disaster management, the role of vulnerability is an important aspect to be investigated, not only on the nature of the threat but also the underlying characteristics of the environment and society that makes them susceptible to damage and losses (Roxana et. al, 2013). According to Rajagopalan (2014), vulnerability is a creation of various factors including a person's socioeconomic status, gender, age, and physical ability. Generally, women are more vulnerable than men, and poor women even more so. A poor, disabled, or aged woman head of household is extremely vulnerable, as are young girls whose family structures are shattered by disaster. For women, vulnerability also is determined by biology—pregnancy, lactation, and the reproductive cycle in general make them more

vulnerable when disaster strikes. Gender inequality increases women's vulnerability before, during, and after disasters in many ways, depending on the type and location of a disaster, and the cultural and social context. The vulnerabilities of women and men change as the disaster-management cycle proceeds. For example, more women died in an earthquake in Maharashtra because they were in their homes while men were harvesting crops, preparing for a festival, or working in other districts, and boys were attending school elsewhere (Shwoebel & Menon, 2004). During a 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, many women perished with their children at home because they had to wait for their husbands to return and decide whether the family would evacuate (World Health Organization, 2002).

Study by Enarson (2009) on disasters and gender has pointed to the social construction of vulnerability to disasters, especially on the basis of gender relations. She argued that mainstreaming gender in disaster management is critically important as women are the key economics actors throughout the disaster cycle of preparedness, mitigation, relief and reconstruction and that women's economic vulnerability to future disasters is due to the lack of attention to gender equity and equality in disaster interventions. Lack of attention has led to the little data on gender issues during the national and state level preparedness and mitigation phases and therefore the existing gender and disaster knowledge have not been systematically compiled and organized. Literature on gender and disasters shows the importance of gender in disaster mitigation to increase women's resilience to disaster. Therefore, this paper also seeks to understand, whether gender has been adequately addressed in the local disaster management plan and its consequences.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### *Women and Vulnerabilities*

In general term, vulnerability can be defined as the inability to withstand the effects of a hostile environment. In relations to disaster management, the role of vulnerability is an important aspect to be investigated, not only on the nature of the threat but also the underlying characteristics of the environment and society that makes them susceptible to damage and losses (Roxana et. al, 2013). According to Rajagopalan (2014), vulnerability is a creation of various factors including a person's socioeconomic status, gender, age, and physical ability. Generally, women are more vulnerable than men, and poor women even more so. A poor, disabled, or aged woman head of household is extremely vulnerable, as are young girls whose

family structures are shattered by disaster. Vulnerability is also defined as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to ‘anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from’ the impact of a natural or human-made hazard (Blaikie et al. 1994; Wisner et al. 2004). The root causes of this vulnerability lie with the lack of access to the resources that allow people to cope with hazardous events – such as income, education, health and social networks. This access may be gendered, in that women and girls in general tend to have less access to, or control over, assets than men and boys (Bradshaw & Fordham, 2013). Vulnerability may also be related to the roles women and men play in society.

For women, vulnerability also is determined by biology—pregnancy, lactation, and the reproductive cycle in general make them more vulnerable when disaster strikes (Neumayer & Plu, 2007). Gender inequality increases women’s vulnerability before, during, and after disasters in many ways, depending on the type and location of a disaster, and the cultural and social context. The vulnerabilities of women and men change as the disaster-management cycle proceeds. For example, more women died in an earthquake in Maharashtra because they were in their homes while men were harvesting crops, preparing for a festival, or working in other districts, and boys were attending school elsewhere (Shwoebel & Menon, 2004). During a 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh, many women perished with their children at home because they had to wait for their husbands to return and decide whether the family would evacuate (World Health Organization, 2002). Women’s vulnerability is emerged in every stage of disaster-management cycle. For example, before disaster, women are seldom represented on decision-making bodies before, during, and after disasters, and so their needs and interests are not taken into account. Women tend to be regarded as helpless victims who need to be protected and told what to do rather than potential resources (Silva & Ramanie, 2014). During disaster, cultural norms such as seclusion, which requires women to be accompanied by male relatives in public, resulted in the loss of women’s and their dependents’ lives, if women delay escape until a male relative can decide whether to evacuate the family.

#### 4. Methodology

This paper is based on three focus group discussions involving 23 women of flood victims in three different districts in Kelantan, namely Pasir Mas, Tumpat and Kota Bharu. The respondents were selected through snowballing samplings, with the help of selected contact person from each district. The women were selected to represent accounts of how they

experienced the major flood disaster in December 2014. The interview involved an audio-taped interaction between the respondent and the interviewer, conducted using semi-structured and open-ended questions that covered chosen themes. The interview started with a general discussion about the demographic profiling, followed by a discussion on access to aid, gender issues during and after flood, specific needs of women at the evacuation centre, and some social organisational issues. Respondents were encouraged to share stories about the resilience issue when dealing with natural disaster. The interview ended with a discussion on the suggestion to improve the standard operating procedure (SOP) and aids distribution among flood victims. This paper takes a narrative analysis approach, using the narratives of respondents as empirical evidence to support the arguments made by teasing out common threads.

## 5. Analysis/Findings

The findings revealed that male and female of flood victims are vary in terms of needs, priorities, capacities and their resilience to disaster management. Gender issues and women resilience during flood disaster are socially constructed under different geographic, cultural, political-economic and social conditions. They have a complex social consequences for women and men. For the purpose of discussion, this section will focus on impacts of floods event on women's lives, livelihoods, and health. The research finding shows that there are still gender gap in flood disaster responses and in the existing disaster management plan. The gender gaps are discussed in the sub-sections as follows.

### 5.1 Clearer procedure and instruction

The respondents also argued that the procedure in getting aids should also be clear and systematic. For example, government agencies such as Malaysia Civil Defence Department (JPAM) and Fire and Rescue Department are recommended to be more prepared in terms of giving a clearer procedure during emergency and this procedure is especially crucial for mothers with young children and whose husbands were not around when the disaster struck. The study also found that a more systematic procedure to register flood victims at evacuation centre should be properly planned. Priority should be given to single mothers, aging people and family with many children. Women with small children whose husbands were away have to independently survive, and single mothers were not given enough attention during the emergency times.

### *5.2 Social Network*

The research finding also shows that women still have to depend on their husbands' social network to get assistance although the husbands were working 'out-station'. For example, one mother of six children had to rely on her husband's social network in order to get someone to help her who was stranded at home with no food and electricity. She had no choice but to stay at home as she has six children to take care of with the youngest was two years old. Finally, her husband's friend came with his own boat to move her out from the flooded house. As has been argued in the literature, women through traditional feminine ways have more tendencies to create socio-emotional oriented ties whereas men through traditional masculine ways tend to create more institution oriented networks. These different social networks allocate resources in different ways.

### *5.3 Matters of Privacy : Aurat*

Protecting "aurat" in public space like evacuation centre can have more impact on female victims than male victims as women have to consciously and consistently covering their head, making their own private space if they want to get some rest, which is usually quite impossible to get. In some evacuation centre, prayer robes were not sufficient, making it difficult for women to perform prayer while at the same time have to cover their aurat. In terms of aids at the evacuation centre, majority of respondents claimed that food and clothes including women sanitary pads were quite abundance. However, majority of women still could not get enough access to women undergarments. Items such as women undergarments are often being seen as less important items during disaster but it can influence the emotional level of victims particularly when private spaces become limited.

### *5.4 Inaccessible to aids*

In terms of aids during the disaster struck, the respondents suggested that the aids should be provided more efficiently so that the flood victims particularly the female victims are able to get the help they needed. The research finding shows that there are still gender gap in flood disaster responses and in the existing disaster management plan. Aids were not equally distributed among victims, with too much emphasized for those who were staying at the flood-evacuation centre while marginalizing those who were staying at relative's house or other

places. However, respondent claimed that they were quite reluctant to ask for more “women stuff” as they did not want to be seen as being “too demanding”. They were often being told to just “make do” with whatever they have at the evacuation centre. Previous studies have shown that when disaster strikes it has often impacted on reproductive needs of women. Women often feel reluctant to ask about basic needs because majority of those in charged at the relief distribution are males.

## 6. Conclusion

Although all groups in the society suffer from the devastating effects of floods, majority of the victims are women and children (Olumide, 2008; Mordi, 2011). Focus on gender mainstreaming in disaster management is therefore, critical because otherwise, women will continue to be disproportionately affected by disasters (Kottegoda, 2013). All those working in the area, whether in the field of study and analysis or in the field of relief distribution and emergency response, should recognize the specific needs and concerns of women in a disaster situation as well as the specific contribution that women can make to sustainable recovery and reconstruction. All disaster responses and interventions should be designed based on such a gender-sensitive understanding. The inclusion of a gender perspective in all norms and procedures established to mitigate and manage disasters is by now an absolutely essential component of the work in this area (Silva & Ramanie, 2014).

In terms of post-flood disaster, there are many other problems faced by the victims. Women have to take the most burdens in cleaning up the houses and it is not an easy task to do while having to take care of small children themselves. The aftermath of the flood disaster left a big impact on the families in terms of economic, mental and physical burden. Although there were abundance of food at the evacuation centre, cash seems to be the most critical items for them to rebuild their lives. Therefore, current responses and procedures to flood disaster management model have to be reviewed and gender dimension have to be integrated in order to significantly improve the preparedness and relief program during flood disaster. This study highlights the need of detailed analysis on how disaster or flood affects women and how Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) planning could be more gender-sensitive.

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